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Kim Marshall

Teachers and Schools—What Makes a Difference: A Principal's Perspective

I HAVE BEEN WORKING AS A TEACHER, central office administrator, and principal in the Boston Public Schools for twenty-two years. The challenges are immense, and my colleagues and I have to fight off pessimism and despair every day. At their best, teachers and schools can and do make a difference. With the right ingredients, they can and do change children's lives for the better. But we are in an uphill battle, and our national and local leaders have not been providing the kind of blueprint that we need for education to have its full impact. We need to be part of a nationwide strategy to address issues of poverty, health care, housing, and racial antagonism.

Yet there is still much that can be done in education, especially at the level of the individual school. This aspect of being a teacher and a principal attracted me from the beginning: one can have a significant impact even if the world outside seems to be falling apart.

"Making a difference" has a particular meaning in this article. In the usual sense, all schools make a difference. Most children learn to read, write, and compute, and an increasing percentage graduate from high school and go on to productive work or higher education. But in recent decades, the challenge of educating the least advantaged students has become increasingly difficult because the culture of poverty is so much more stubborn, because the basic requirements for work and higher education are so much greater, and because we no longer have a safety net of low-skill jobs for those who drop out of school. I believe that effective schools are those that find ways of educating *all* their students.

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This standard of educational effectiveness focuses attention on what schools do for the disadvantaged student—not just the poor, but also the dyslexic, the rebellious, and the unconventional learner. For these children, the role of the school is a matter of life and death. For children who enter schools prepared to learn (their parents have been reading to them, teaching them their letters, plunking them down in front of Sesame Street, taking them to museums), school makes a difference, but not this kind of difference. Ready-to-learn children can survive teachers who are less than stellar, classroom experiences that are less than inspirational, and schools that are less than excellent. To an alarming degree, those who come to school with an empty stomach, weak family support, negative peer pressures, low self-esteem, and inadequate prerequisite skills are those who fall into a chronic pattern of school failure and drop out before high school graduation—with devastating long-term consequences. Is this inevitable? Is it hopelessly idealistic to think that schools can educate all children?

There *is* a powerful tendency for schools to favor those who are ready to learn and push out those who are not. Traditionally-structured schools are rigged against the disadvantaged to such a degree that we can predict school failure as early as first grade. Yet there are teachers and schools who have been successful in bringing a more equitable distribution of educational results—without harming their more advantaged students. Research and anecdotal accounts have documented this fact. In these effective schools, the rising tide raises all boats. Those who entered school more advantaged will probably leave with their masts higher than those of their less advantaged classmates. But the difference with effective schools is that the keels of all boats clear the rocky bottom. There is basic equity in the delivery of the skills and knowledge necessary for all children to succeed as they make their way through school—and in the open sea beyond. This ideal of effective schooling is challenging and elusive, but pursuing it is a moral imperative.

SCHOOLS—WHAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

In my nine years as a classroom teacher, my focus was almost entirely on my classroom. I operated on the assumption that my students had learned little before they came to me, and I saw my Herculean

challenge as teaching them as though they would never again have an effective teacher. (If this sounds quixotic, keep in mind that I came of age in the 1960s.) I was lucky to have a principal who left me alone, and I operated with almost complete autonomy, ignoring whole chunks of the city's curriculum and the occasional instructional guidelines that the central office found the time to send us during Boston's desegregation crises. As long as my classroom was reasonably quiet and parents didn't complain, I was free to do what I wanted.

Then, in the late 1970s, I read the new "school effectiveness" research pioneered by George Weber[1] and Ronald Edmonds.[2] I also read *Fifteen Thousand Hours*, a British study by Michael Rutter and his colleagues.[3] These researchers located and described urban public schools that went counter to the general trend of substandard education. They analyzed the schools that were successful for all students, even the poorest and lowest-achieving, and identified a set of factors that these schools had in common. Edmonds's list included: a strong principal, high expectations, a safe and humane climate, a focus on basic skills, and the instructional use of test data. The correlates of success from other studies were surprisingly consistent. The research was especially welcome in contrast to the depressing studies of the 1970s, which seemed to say that schools did not make a difference for children.[4]

As I read the effective schools research, a new consciousness dawned. The notion that there might be an impact beyond the heroic teacher—that the school as a whole might operate as a coherent unit and have a collective impact on its students over time—was revolutionary to me. I realized that good teaching, although it is the wellspring of all lasting effects on students, is not enough. If teachers, even superstar teachers, work in isolation (as they usually do), most of their impact on students will be dissipated over time. I saw that for teachers to make a real difference, they have to be part of a *schoolwide* effort. For a school to be effective, it has to be more than a collection of good teachers; it has to be a team effort.

The new research also made me see for the first time the key role of the principal in leading the staff and shaping an environment in which teachers can do their best work, and this led to a job change. I went to graduate school to get the necessary certification, and after a six-year detour working in the central office, I finally became principal of the Mather Elementary School in Boston's Dorchester area, where I am now in my sixth year.

Although I am immersed in the day-to-day challenges of running a school, the research on effective schools continues to intrigue, challenge, and guide me. What follows is a synthesis, based on my reading and personal experience, of the characteristics of effective schools and some thoughts on the process for making them come to life in the real world.

Effective Schools Must Have Instructional Leadership

A humbling thought for principals is that we do not do the actual work of a school; that is what teachers do in their classrooms. Because principals are spread so thin and are chronically tied up in administrative tasks, teachers are without supervision 99 percent of the time, working with children in ways that make sense to them from their training, experience, values, and the cultural norms of the school. The principal's effect on instruction is quite indirect, and most "leaders" have a limited impact on the culture and basic functions of a school in their years in a building.

The traditional model of the principal is to take care of the discipline, handle administrative matters, and leave teachers alone. Many elementary teachers, content in their self-contained classrooms, are understandably wary of principals trying to assert themselves as instructional leaders. Some small schools have even tried to go back to a variation of the original model of early American schoolhouses, doing without a principal and distributing the administrative and disciplinary tasks among a newly-empowered teaching staff.

So, is "instructional leadership" an unneeded and unwanted intrusion on the professional autonomy that teachers need to work their magic with students? It certainly can be if it is done badly, but the research indicates that a deft and well-trained instructional leader is the key to providing support to teachers, breaking the isolation so common in elementary classrooms, and enhancing teachers' long-range impact on their students.

Instructional leadership varies from principal to principal and from school to school. I will sketch the ways in which I have tried to lead the Mather School over the last five years.

First and foremost, I try to communicate that teaching and learning come first. There are so many other things going on in schools (attendance reports, records that have to be filled out, lunch cards, union business, keeping students out of trouble, staff gossip, etc.) that it takes a tenacious effort to keep instruction first. Perhaps the most eloquent statement a principal can make about the primacy of instruction is what he or she *doesn't* do. Schoolwide announcements on the public address system are the bane of teachers' existence ("Will the owner of a blue Toyota, license plate MDM-761 please move your car. It is blocking . . . "). In addition to snapping every train of thought in classrooms throughout the school, such announcements (which happen two or three times every period in many schools) carry another message to teachers: What you are doing in your classrooms is less important than what we have to announce. In the office at our school, there is a hard and fast rule against making all-call announcements; I carry a beeper so I can be located easily, and if we need to find someone, we simply do the legwork.

Another key aspect of instructional leadership is getting things that make teachers' work with children easier and more effective. This includes supplies and materials, computers for classrooms, reliable substitute teachers when teachers are out sick or at workshops; it also means assuring an orderly, safe, and clean environment, social workers to counsel troubled students, student teachers and tutor/mentors from local universities and businesses, and much more. Sometimes teachers haven't requested or even thought of the things that I bring into the school, but more often I'm responding to requests that arrive with increasing frequency. I make a point of being highly visible around the school, trying (not always successfully) to visit each of the forty classrooms every day. Being around the school is critical to being an "askable" principal, and sometimes one pass is not enough. I once walked down a corridor four times within a few minutes before a teacher came out and said, "By the way, Mr. Marshall, could I possibly have. . . . "

Another way for a principal to be an instructional leader and at the same time create greater credibility and kinship with teachers is to do some actual classroom teaching. Given the constant demands on a principal's time, this is extremely difficult, but two years ago, I began teaching each fifth-grade class an extended unit on a subject I was trained in years ago: sex education. It has the advantage of being a topic that no teacher wanted to touch but that all agreed was important to students. Teaching the course has been an important part of establishing my bona fides as an elementary educator.

Another aspect of instructional leadership is spotting good programs and finding ways of bringing them into the school. For example, three years ago, I began hearing about a program called

Reading Recovery. Originally from New Zealand, it is designed to boost the reading achievement of first graders who are having trouble learning to read by means of intensive, daily, one-on-one assistance from highly-trained teachers over a three-month period. I got the support of my boss, went to a conference in Ohio, talked it up in the staff, and found two teachers in the school who were interested in going through the incredibly rigorous year of training. The program is now firmly established and having a very positive impact on a number of students each year.

A different kind of instructional leadership is packaging ideas from the staff into a program that can win outside funding. Several years ago, our long-range planning group identified four seemingly unrelated problems: the school had no gym; we were unable to keep students after school for detention because some students had to catch buses and it would be unfair to keep only the walkers; students had hardly any field trips to the many cultural sites in the Boston area; and there was no after-school program for students who desperately needed more attention and an academic boost. Our committee packaged these needs into the "Mathermobile," a four-day-a-week bus, funded by a special state grant, that does quadruple duty ferrying students to a neighborhood gym, taking students on field trips, and taking home detention students and after-school program students late in the afternoon.

Another area of leadership is raising money for worthwhile projects. I spend a lot of time identifying needs and writing grants, and some of my most satisfying moments as principal have been getting the news that we won a grant to implement a new program that would not otherwise have been possible. Our students sell a prodigious amount of candy twice a year (with only token resistance from the cavity-fighting lobby), and we put the money into a wide range of activities, including teacher workshops, curriculum materials, new equipment, and field trips. We have won a corporate partner for the school (The New England, a national life insurance company), and it provides a budget for things like photographs and pizza parties for classes with perfect attendance, teacher workshops, classroom sets of newspapers and magazines, and parent involvement.

Sharing important research and practical wisdom with teachers is another key leadership activity. Every day I write and distribute the "Mather Memo" to the entire staff. It includes items like the time of a fire drill, a reminder about a good workshop, and a report on a

parent meeting the night before. Most days I squeeze in a brief professional clipping on the back of the memo. Clippings have included a teacher's account of dealing with a difficult student, a research report on the use of calculators in math classes, an opinion piece on the proposed national test by Albert Shanker (president of the American Federation of Teachers), and an article on Deborah Tannen's theory about differences in men's and women's communication styles. I keep the clippings short enough so that most of the staff read virtually all the clippings. These short articles stimulate many teachers to read more on their own. We subscribe to thirty teacher magazines and newsletters, and they are all available in a curriculum center that also contains a small professional library and other equipment for copying and making classroom materials.

I also encourage teachers to attend courses and workshops outside the school. Teachers come back with fresh energy, new ideas, and a sense that we're not the only ones facing challenging problems. Last year, three-quarters of the staff went to outside workshops, averaging four per teacher, for an astonishing total of 125 days of training.

Instructional leadership also means bringing in good speakers for staff meetings. Recent topics have included multicultural education, cooperative learning, violence prevention, sexual abuse prevention, dealing with death, and hands-on science and math techniques. Even better than outside speakers has been organizing our own teachers to give workshops themselves. Few teachers will do this kind of thing on their own—there is a cultural norm in most schools against being seen as boasting to colleagues about one's own classroom innovations—and it takes a principal to provide an acceptable forum if they are to feel comfortable sharing effective practices.

An effective principal must also work on building a positive and caring environment and school culture. The Mather Memo is an important vehicle: staff birthdays are noted, staff members are praised for special contributions and projects, and every Friday there is a cartoon. Students' birthdays are also noted, so that they will receive greetings from adults who know him or her throughout the day. I go around each day with specially-inscribed birthday pencils ("Happy birthday from Mr. Marshall and the Mather School Staff") and present one to each student and staff member on their special day, which is a surprisingly big deal even for streetwise fifth graders ("Mr. Marshall, don't forget my birthday is tomorrow!"). There are other ways to build positive school culture: an annual faculty talent show (in which we all make fools of ourselves

to the great delight of students), regular celebrations and parties, and other rituals like dressing up at Halloween and Secret Santa at Christmas.

This is all part of breaking the isolation of elementary teachers in their classrooms. Principals need to forge a sense of common purpose and give teachers a sense of being part of a larger enterprise than the all-consuming work with the children in front of them. My incomplete efforts in this area include organizing a weekly 15-minute assembly for the school (in which we sing the school song, watch a 5-minute presentation by a different homeroom each week, and listen to a brief message by the principal). I hold regular meetings with grade-level teams of teachers, get teams to meet with the teachers above and below their level to compare notes on curriculum, send teachers off to conferences together, and tackle thorny issues like student discipline and staff-race relations in all-staff discussions.

Another vital piece is making the right interventions on student discipline. Our most important meeting as a staff was holding a full-day meeting in which we achieved consensus on four categories of student misbehavior—taboos, serious problems, no-no's, and uh-uh's—and what would happen if students broke the rules. More recently, the staff took the initiative in reshaping our morning entry and afternoon dismissal procedures; major improvements were made in both areas.

I work hard to create a positive set of relationships with parents, based on the belief that students will do better work if they sense that their parents and teachers—the most important adults in their lives—are on the same wavelength. This has meant overcoming mutual distrust and misunderstanding and being sure that parents always feel welcome in the building. Teachers have been more than a little suspicious of my basic orientation—that parents are our clients, we work for them, and they must always be treated with respect, even when they are strident. I am careful to support teachers publicly with the occasionally angry parent, and gradually I have won most teachers' trust. The clincher is that virtually all parents have a very high opinion of the school, feel we are there for their children, and support our efforts.

Missing from this list is what might seem the most obvious aspect of instructional leadership: supervision and evaluation of teachers. It is the aspect of my principalship about which I feel least satisfied, but I have recently been relieved of some of my guilt by reading that W. Edwards Deming, the American management guru, does not believe in the efficacy of traditional personnel reviews. My own experience

leads me to agree wholeheartedly with what Mike Schmoker, a research analyst, has written:

> Evaluation has become a polite, if near-meaningless matter between a beleaguered principal and a nervous teacher. Research has finally told us what many of us suspected all along: that conventional evaluation, the kind the overwhelming majority of American teachers undergo, does not have any measurable impact on the quality of student learning. In most cases, it is a waste of time.[5]

One of my major complaints with our central office is the evaluation process we are required to use and the impossibly large number of teachers we must evaluate each year—forty-one in my case. The most meaningful feedback I give teachers is in brief, informal comments on lessons or interactions I've seen in my travels around the school. Very little of substance comes through the formal evaluation process, despite the enormous amount of time and anxiety it takes. As an alternative, I am most intrigued with the idea of videotaping teachers and sitting together watching the tape and sharing ideas on how the lesson went. I have tried this only a few times, but it is a powerful process; the camera holds up an unwavering mirror to teachers, and students are remarkably unfazed by the camera's presence.

Being a highly visible and available principal makes one thing virtually inevitable: no paperwork will get done during the day. All that is shunted to the late afternoon and evening, and is the main reason why I work a 78-hour week when school is in session. I recently had an intern follow me around for a day, and he recorded two hundred separate interactions with staff members and students in 7 hours (and this did not include scores of "Hello's" to students in passing). While this figure is far short of the one thousand interactions most teachers have each day,[6] a principal's day is more fragmented, unpredictable, and difficult to control. The action is relentless, and it is a constant struggle to keep the instructional leadership agenda from being swamped by all the random events that conspire to gobble up my time. Yet all these other events are part of the job too—a student with a splinter in her finger, an unexpected delivery of twenty heavy boxes by a truck driver with a bad back, a jam in the Xerox machine that threatens to bring the school to a grinding halt. I have to keep reminding myself that each event is a small opportunity to build a positive climate, support a teacher, strengthen a relationship, and perhaps relieve someone's pain (getting that splinter out without too many tears). The essence of instructional

leadership is being cheerfully available to do just about anything and still keeping the overall game plan.

Effective Schools Must Have a Clear and Focused Mission

The need for a schoolwide focus on basic skills and learning outcomes has been common to almost all the effective schools studies, which in turn echo the corporate literature on excellence. For a school to be successful, it must have a set of shared beliefs that creates a constant drive for improvement and maximizes the use of time and resources.

The evolution of our mission statement at the Mather School is an interesting case study. Over the last few years, we have gone through several stages. We have been driven by external pressures to raise our standardized test scores and attract more parents to the school (Boston has a "controlled choice" student assignment plan in which parents choose schools within racial guidelines). But in an attempt to focus on the more important underlying effectiveness of the school, we developed long-range planning goals focused on students' reading and math skills, their "cultural literacy," boosting the achievement of "at-risk" students, supporting teachers, and getting parents involved in their children's learning. These goals helped us write proposals and get funding for a wide variety of projects.

Building on these goals, we came up with a series of slogans and value statements to describe our purpose, including: "America's oldest public elementary school"; "We can touch the world"; "All children can learn"; "Hands-on experiences teach best"; "Cultural literacy and the arts are basic"; "A safe, caring community focused on learning." With these statements plastered all over the school, I assumed that we had a clearly defined sense of mission and purpose. So did most staff members. In each end-of-the-year questionnaire for the last five years, the staff has been very positive on the following question. For example, last June, in response to, "Do you think the Mather School has a clear sense of purpose and mission?," 76 percent said yes and only 24 percent said no.

But in last June's questionnaire, I added a follow-up question asking the staff to *describe* that mission. Only fifteen of the forty staff members who filled out the questionnaire were willing to write anything, and they gave fifteen different answers! This total lack of unanimity was dramatic evidence that I had failed to build a consensus around a common mission. It was clear that our goals and slogans did not meet the basic standards of a good mission statement, which should: capture the central vision of the school; focus on outcomes; be short and memorable; and be known and believed by the entire staff.

I came into the 1992–1993 school year determined to forge a true consensus on the mission of the school. In presenting the challenge to the staff in early September, I first asked, Why bother? Couldn't we muddle through without one? I answered my own question by asserting that without a clear mission, we would not make a real difference for our students or improve our chronically mediocre morale. If our students were to succeed against the daunting odds that face them, we must work as a unified team. I argued that a sense of purpose and direction was also a vital ingredient in good morale. Without an ambitious goal, a school can come to see itself as warehousing children, baby-sitting and entertaining them for lives that will not matter, which will guarantee mediocre outcomes and prevent the adults from being happy and productive professionals. "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

To write a mission statement with real meaning, we had to define a vision for students and we needed to face up to our greatest fears. For an inner-city elementary school, the most idealistic vision is that we will help students break the bonds of poverty, enter the mainstream, and lead happy and productive lives. Our greatest fear is that even our best efforts will not be enough to help students overcome poverty, dysfunctional families, teenage pregnancy, AIDS, racism, violence, and educational mediocrity in their teenage years. A good mission statement lies somewhere between the idealistic vision and these daunting fears. As an elementary school, what can we realistically do for our students? What is an attainable goal—something we can strive for without overpromising or promising too little?

The idea for the first draft of the Mather Mission came from one of the fifteen responses to last June's questionnaire. A teacher wrote that we should "respect, care for, and educate each child." This eloquent, practical, yet idealistic statement served as our starting point. I put in an additional element: what we can and must do in an elementary school is get students ready to be successful at the next level. This is an incremental approach to the eventual vision, and it focuses on what we know we can do well if we focus on it. The impetus for this second ingredient came from the corporate literature on Total Quality Management, which brings a refreshing perspective to school improvement efforts—a focus on serving one's customers. W. Edwards Deming, the American management genius who is credited with scripting the postwar Japanese economic miracle,

speaks of the need for *constant improvements in producing what the customer wants and needs.*[7] Who are a school's customers? Students and parents are customers, to be sure. So are local employers. And what do these customers want? They might all agree on one thing: that children grow up to lead happy and productive lives.

But this desire is rather remote from the day-to-day running of an elementary school. What is a more concrete, immediate customer need that can guide the staff? The indispensable next step for an elementary school student is being successful in middle school. Without that, students won't go on to high school, get a diploma, and go to college or a good entry-level job—and in today's world, that means their chances of leading a happy and productive life are slim. So the most immediate goal in serving our students is preparing them to be successful in middle school.

Thinking of our mission in these terms has immediate and refreshing implications for an elementary school staff. Rather than swimming around in vague goals and slogans or worrying too much about test scores or other easily-distorted indicators of success, it got us thinking about the kind of graduate we want to produce—a graduate who will do well in any middle school and have a good chance of progressing toward the ultimate life goals.

In meetings at the beginning of this school year, and in drafts sent back and forth for one revision after another, our staff hammered out and agreed unanimously on a greatly-improved mission statement, backed up by a set of core values and a specific list of school outcomes we believe are needed for success in middle school. The Mather Mission is now: To respect, nurture, and educate all our students so they can confidently and successfully take the next step in their lives.

The three core values are now: *1)* How we work as a staff. The Mather School is a safe and caring community of learners. Relationships within the school, and between home and school, are marked by mutual respect and trust, teamwork and creativity, and a continuous quest for better and better ways to help all students learn and grow. *2)* How we think children learn best. Our philosophy of teaching and learning can be summed up as: WHAM!—*W*hole language, *H*ands-on, *A*ctive, cooperative learning with *M*ulticultural content. *3)* What we want our graduates to know. To succeed in middle and high school, and to have access to higher education and the jobs of the next century, Mather students need the following skills and attributes (which we call "Twenty-one Keys to the Twenty-First Century"): *1)* Basic skills—really solid competence in reading, writ-

ing, and math; *2)* Basic knowledge—key facts and concepts in history, geography, science, and current events; *3)* A love of reading—genuine interest in reading for learning and enjoyment; *4)* Critical thinking—being able to form opinions and think independently; *5)* Study skills—being able to get organized, take notes, use a library, and get information; *6)* Verbal skills—being able to express ideas, opinions, or findings to an audience; *7)* Creative expression—appreciating the arts and one's own creative potential; *8)* Computer literacy—using computers for word processing and other applications; *9)* Health and fitness—taking care of one's body through exercise, nutrition, sleep, etc.; *10)* Self-discipline—being able to work independently and take responsibility; *11)* Efficacy—believing that effort will produce results, that one can "get smart" through hard work; *12)* Self-knowledge—knowing one's strengths and weaknesses; *13)* Self-esteem—being confident in one's abilities and accomplishments; *14)* Cultural pride—identifying positively with one's own origins; *15)* Respect for diversity—understanding and appreciating racial/ethnic, male/female differences; *16)* Cooperation—being able to work harmoniously with others; *17)* Problem-solving—being able to solve problems and resolve conflicts using effective strategies; *18)* Teen survival skills—knowing the basic facts about drugs, alcohol, sex, AIDS, and violence; *19)* Assertiveness—being able to say NO to harmful pressures and stand up for one's rights; *20)* Mentors—knowing and drawing on positive adult role models for guidance and support; *21)* The golden rule—a disposition to treat others as one wants to be treated.

The implications of these graduation goals for the school are clear. Because the fifth grade teachers clearly can't accomplish this list by themselves, there has to be a coherent K-5 curriculum with each grade handing off solid achievements to the next so that students move toward the eventual goals. In this sense, every grade level's teachers are the preceding grade's customers: kindergarten teachers should be working to improve what they pass along to first grade teachers, first grade to second grade, and so on.

Thinking in terms of preparing students for middle school also leaves room for activities that would not fit into a more narrowly defined mission. For example, one of the most important contributions a school can make is to give students the knowledge and assertiveness skills to avoid sexual abuse in their lives—or, if they have been abused, giving them counseling to begin to repair the

damage. This would not be part of our mission if we were focused primarily on raising test scores, but it does serve the mission of maximizing children's chances of taking the next step toward a happy and fulfilled life.

Another advantage of this mission statement is that progress can be measured. Through our school department's excellent data system, we can track the basic achievement (including grades, attendance, and discipline information) of every student still in the city's public schools. Thus, we can measure our long-range impact, controlling for how many years each student actually spent at the Mather, giving ourselves credit where we have been successful and trying to adjust our program where we see failures.

All this lies ahead. What we have done so far is clarify the vision and set some very ambitious goals. We now have a great deal of work in making the mission statement come to life.

The Mather's story is just one example of shaping a mission statement to specific circumstances and needs. Each school must find its own mission through a similar process of discussion, trial, and error, taking care to involve all constituencies. Some schools may want to adopt a package from outside, and there are several on the educational marketplace: James Comer's School Improvement model from New Haven; Henry Levin's Accelerated Schools program from Stanford; cooperative learning or whole language as a schoolwide focus; the Child Development Program from San Ramon, California; and others. Each of these school improvement packages is a complex set of interventions under the umbrella of a few simple principles. The important thing is that the entire school community buy into the model that is adopted, that the model is intelligently adapted to local conditions, that it is really brought to life throughout the school, and that it is constantly refreshed and revitalized.

An Effective School Must Have High Expectations of All Students

There must be a pervasive belief among the staff that all children can and will learn. Why is it necessary to assert something that seems so obvious? Because the forces that produce low expectations are so powerful. There are many subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which low expectations are communicated to students. Because children are extremely sensitive to what adults think of their abilities, these beliefs are self-fulfilling. Some teachers buy into a Darwinian fatalism about student achievement: *single-parent families; mothers don't read to them; no museum trips; we have them only five hours a day; there's no way these kids can catch up. What can you do?*

In many classrooms, this process goes on day after day; teachers get bogged down in discipline struggles, and expectations sink. It is impossible for teachers to be creative and hopeful under such conditions. The result is an embattled, cynical attitude, and constant complaining. Some teachers are actually angry at students for coming to school so unready to learn, and angrier at their parents for not acting like middle-class people and not coming to parent conferences. Underlying these feelings is the belief that it is the responsibility of children and their families to adjust to the expectations of the school.

Teachers who have *high* expectations accept students and their families as they are (One of my colleagues says, "Parents send us the best students they have.") and project a serene, sometimes irrational confidence that an effective classroom and school can and will overcome entering disadvantages. These teachers believe that hard work, not innate ability or family background, is the key. They are willing to adapt the classroom to fit the child rather than demanding that the child and family conform to the school.

The principal is a key person in keeping expectations high. Individual teachers may believe their students can learn, but the pressures to lower expectations are so powerful that the principal must constantly remind the entire school community of its beliefs. This can take the form of signs on the walls, a school creed recited at assemblies, a school song with this belief in the lyrics, giving teachers articles that reinforce the importance of high expectations and how to implement them, and visiting speakers who drive the message home.

The most important manifestation of a school's expectations is the curriculum content taught at each grade level. There has to be agreement on specific, attainable, appropriately challenging curriculum goals for each level, with exemplars showing what students are expected to accomplish and enlightened assessments to hold them accountable. Teachers should have the flexibility to come up with the best methods and materials to help students reach the goals.

A demanding curriculum is important, but it is possible to take things too far. One of the most unfortunate developments in the 1970s and early 1980s was the way many primary-grade educators, in the name of high expectations, moved first-grade curriculum objectives down into kindergarten, forcing students to learn (or parrot) things for which they were not developmentally ready, and in the process making school into an unpleasant, failure-producing chore for those children who could least afford to bear that burden.

But the more common tendency is the opposite: watering down the curriculum for students who are not doing well—or for whole schools with disadvantaged, low-achieving students. It is difficult for teachers to swim against the tide when many students are extremely frustrated and actively resist the grade-level curriculum by refusing to do the work or acting out when difficult work is presented. The path of least resistance, similar to the unspoken "deal" Ted Sizer has described between high school teachers and their students *(If you don't push us to work too hard, we won't misbehave)*,[8] is to give students easier work: fill-in-the-blank worksheets, fun puzzles, games, loosely-structured class discussions, and other low-level activities that nibble around the edges of the curriculum but are not the rigorous reading, writing, problem-solving, and thinking that is needed to pull students up to grade-level standards. Not that learning can't be fun and involving, but it has to be focused on appropriate objectives if students are to achieve.

A vital ingredient in shaping and implementing appropriate expectations is a regular forum for teachers to share successful practices. Goals that can seem out of reach at first blush can be implemented when there are opportunities for teachers to share ideas. When the Boston schools launched a new reading/language arts curriculum in 1982 that called for kindergarten students to know left from right, I recall one kindergarten teacher strenuously objecting. She said that it was too hard, impossibie to attain, cruel to the students, and simply crazy. Another teacher quietly held up her left hand with the thumb pointed out at right angles, and said this is how she had been teaching her kindergarten students to remember left from right; see how the hand looks like the letter L? Stunned silence. The first teacher had suddenly found a way to teach the "impossible" objective. There needs to be a lot of this kind of sharing if a rigorous, appropriate curriculum is to be taught effectively to all children. Teachers are the best resource for professional development.

Maintaining high expectations requires a stubborn, deep-seated belief in the educability of all children. Where do some teachers get such a belief system? It may come from the experience of having been sold short by teachers oneself. It may come from ideological conviction—from having been exposed to some of the great educators like Ron Edmonds who have preached this gospel. It may come from a planned experience (such as Jeff Howard's Efficacy Institute five-day seminar[9]) that brings about the "paradigm shift" from the concept of schools as sorting machines to a real belief that all children can learn. And it may come from being part of a schoolwide reform initiative

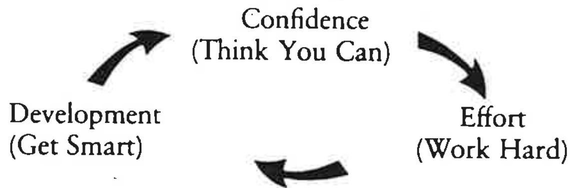
specifically focused on raising expectations, such as Baltimore's "Success for All" program and Vermont's statewide program whose slogan is *Very high skills for every student, no exceptions, no excuses.*

One key activity in keeping expectations high is early identification of children at risk and aggressive efforts to get them help, including tutoring, mentoring, appropriate special education services, and other interventions to accelerate their learning and get them back on the track to success. As was mentioned above, our school has adopted the Reading Recovery program, and teachers are impressed to see the lowest-achieving first graders, students who could identify only a few letters of the alphabet and no common sight words, reading fluently in the middle range of their class after only twelve weeks of intensive one-on-one instruction. Nothing turns around negative expectations more than seeing supposedly hopeless students learn well.

Tracking (grouping homerooms by ability) and grade-level retention are two common ways in which low expectations are institutionalized in schools. There is ample evidence that both practices depress the achievement of at-risk students.[10] Principals have the power to eliminate tracking and greatly reduce retention, and this is an important intervention we can make. Separate special education classes are another way in which students can be prevented from achieving their full potential (although such programs are sometimes necessary to meet students' educational needs). Our school has begun to fully integrate emotionally-disturbed students from a previously self-contained class, with a special education teacher providing help and support to students and classroom teachers. The program is challenging and requires real dedication and extra work, but last year, nine out of ten students in the program made significant progress in regular classrooms and show signs of getting out of what had seemed an endless stay in separate special education classes. This shows how changed expectations (we just treated them like normal children), combined with a well-organized support system outside the classroom, can dramatically alter performance.

But it is not enough to preach high expectations, implement high curriculum standards and effective programs, and avoid tracking and retention. Students must be *taught* a belief system in which effort, not innate ability, is seen as the key to success. Carol Dweck of Columbia University has found that elementary school students who have a "born smart" belief system more often fall apart academically in middle school, even if they were successful up to that point, while students who have the "get smart" belief system are able to improve

their school achievement.[11] Dweck believes that it is possible to shift students from one belief system to another, and student curriculums like that of Jeff Howard's Efficacy Institute are one vehicle. We have adopted the general philosophy implicit in Howard's work, and a sign posted all over the school reads:



Classroom changes include emphasizing mastery of specific subject matter and comparing students against their own performance, rather than that of others. It means treating errors and failures as an opportunity to improve performance. In our school, we recently adopted a new report card for the first and second grades that eliminates the traditional "F" for failure and substitutes a 1–4 scale in which 4 means "not yet." This is a powerful statement that the student hasn't met the standard but is expected to do so with more work.

We are also seeking to de-emphasize the use of extrinsic rewards. Elementary schools abound with lollipops, stickers, prizes, honor roll certificates, and, of course, letter grades that carry great weight for children and their parents. In addition to undermining the development of the "get smart" belief system, too much reliance on extrinsic rewards can also leave students without internal motivation—their own engine for self-improvement. Building in this internal gyroscope for hard work and self-improvement is a vital part of the job of the effective elementary school teacher. It has the most significant impact on students at the bottom of the heap, who tend to be the most dependent on extrinsic rewards.

Another way of fostering high expectations is the use of mastery learning in classrooms—something that usually has to be actively promoted by the principal or the central office. Mastery learning builds on the basic insight that unless students have prerequisite skills under their belt, they cannot be successful in the next unit in the curriculum. Unfortunately, most teachers don't apply this principle of learning: They present new curriculum material, give a test, record the grades (including a number of failures and near-failures), and move on to the next unit. Because much of what is learned in the elementary school curriculum builds on what has come before, students who don't master initial steps fall further and further behind, and few teachers have a systematic way to help them catch up. Even expensive remedial programs that pull students out of their regular classrooms for small-group instruction (such as Chapter I or special education) are usually disconnected from what is going on back in the classroom and do not use a reteaching approach for material that students have not mastered. The result is that students who do not learn well the first time around gradually slip out of the mainstream of school success and become increasingly frustrated, troubled, defiant, and disruptive. The smart get smarter while those who, for whatever reason, were behind coming in, are left in the dust.

Mastery learning breaks this cycle of failure: The teacher presents new material, gives a preliminary test, and then makes strenuous efforts to reteach the material to students who scored below a mastery level (80 percent), using different methods and materials the second time around. Students who did well in the initial lesson do enrichment work or provide peer tutoring for those who haven't understood. When teachers take the extra time to catch students' errors and misconceptions before they accumulate, a much greater percentage of students succeed. The best computer software for classrooms incorporates mastery learning, with systematic teaching of prerequisites, constant testing for mastery, and reteaching loops for those who don't master any step.

Mastery learning is fairly simple to use, and extensive research has proved that it is highly effective for low-achieving students.[12] Why, then, do so few teachers use it? Perhaps because it takes more time at first. Perhaps because of teachers' inertia in adopting a new approach. But I suspect that something more basic is at work here. Most teachers did reasonably well in school themselves, and have rarely experienced what it is like to fail and be left behind with a feeling of inadequacy and shame. Implicit in using mastery learning is *1)* a perceived obligation to help those students who didn't succeed the first time around; *2)* a belief that they can learn the material if it is taught again; and *3)* a commitment to finding different teaching methods and materials that will accomplish what the first round of teaching didn't. Many teachers don't accept these three assumptions. Having seldom needed second chances when they were students, they basically don't believe that their own students *deserve* them.

In short, they have not yet made a commitment to educating all their students. Underlying the conventional, failure-producing teach/test/move-along sequence is the belief that when students fail, it's their fault and they should accept the bad marks and still work hard

to improve themselves. It's the student's obligation to learn. A teacher who uses mastery learning takes responsibility for finding another way to help a failing student learn, and builds in reteaching loops, as well as productive enrichment activities or peer tutoring opportunities for students who master the material the first time around.

Effective Schools Have a Positive Climate

In order to learn, students must feel *safe,* which means all staff members deal quickly and firmly with any threat from within or without. Students have to feel that the adults *care* about them, which means they are understanding, culturally sensitive, and available to get involved in students' lives beyond academics. Students have to feel part of a *community,* which means there are rituals and other symbolic ways to pull students and staff together, and students see their own culture and heritage celebrated and respected in schoolwide activities. And students have to feel there is one overall purpose to the enterprise: *learning.*

Many of the students who pose the greatest threat to safety—and who are most frequently the victims of violence and ridicule—are those whose self-esteem is the most damaged. Their behavior and performance are shaped by a series of negatives: I am ugly; I am stupid; I am bad; I am a loser.[13] Some reject the school's definition of what is good and build their self-esteem on negatives: I am the Terminator. People are afraid of me. I am *bad*! To be effective for these students—and for the school to be a safe and orderly community for everyone—schools must do more than enforce a code of discipline. There must be a "prosocial curriculum" that explicitly develops certain qualities in students starting in kindergarten. Here are some of the key lessons:[14]

Connectedness; feeling you belong. This includes schoolwide practices that pull students together: morning announcements; regular schoolwide assemblies featuring messages of inclusion and participation; schoolwide rituals and awards; stretching learning projects over time so students have a sense of being part of a long-term process that extends over days and weeks; a personalized, child-centered approach within classrooms that uses cooperative learning; and class meetings to resolve problems and share experiences.

Multicultural acceptance. All students need to know about their own racial/ethnic group, know the common culture of the United States, and learn about the culture and heritage of others, starting

with the groups represented by children in the classroom and school. Given the current racial climate in the United States, mutual respect and acceptance across our racial and cultural divides is more important than ever, and it is a vital part of a school's prosocial curriculum.

Uniqueness and competence. The school should give many chances for students to experience success and accept and celebrate each individual's contributions. Praise for accomplishments large and small should be specific so that students have their distinctive qualities affirmed and understand why they are valued. Praise should come not just for getting the right answer but for fresh approaches and originality, which means asking open-ended questions with opportunities for divergent thinking; and downplaying judgmental reactions to students' errors. Wrong answers have to be treated respectfully and seen as opportunities to improve performance rather than signs of incompetence and failure.

Efficacy and independence; feeling you have control over your own life. Students need to believe that they are competent to do what they set out to do. This sense of efficacy does not develop in schools where the staff controls students' every move; it develops when teachers and administrators set clear limits and then increasingly involve students in making choices about learning and classroom organization, gradually empowering them to take responsibility for their own learning and conduct, and helping them develop self-direction and self-control. There is a lot of loose thinking about building students' self-esteem, and much of what passes for wisdom in this area is superficial cheerleading that does not have much impact. True self-esteem is based on actual accomplishments and a thoughtful integration of those achievements into a strong sense of competence and efficacy. There are no shortcuts to that.

Emulating models. The most powerful messages students receive are contained in the actions of the adults around them, which speak louder than words. Schools should be about the business of building character as well as competence; the best way to do this is for the adults to model ethical, tolerant, problem-solving behavior.

Another new strain of thought under the general rubric of school climate is the concept of the "full service school" or "one-stop shopping"—making the school building the site for a wide spectrum

of medical, social, and psychological services. Children are coming to school with increasingly serious problems, and in most cases, the neediest children are not going to community health clinics for medical and other services. If such services are provided within schools, there is a much better chance that children and their families will receive them, and this in turn will prevent many of the consequences of untreated illnesses and problems. Children are a captive audience in schools, and there is a strong case for making schools the primary contact point for the delivery or referral of a wide range of services to children and their families.

Providing a broad range of services in school (as in the full-service school model) is probably the only way to meet the pressing needs of many students. Schools are at a great disadvantage trying to educate students who have excruciating toothaches, untreated medical problems, low self-esteem, and other social and psychological issues in their lives. Nor can teachers take on most of these issues alone. Only by addressing the whole range of issues in a coordinated fashion within one school building can real progress be made. But as this concept is piloted, one thing must be kept in mind: The ultimate purpose of the school is learning. All the other services are means to an end; they are there to help children and their teachers to concentrate even more effectively on teaching and learning.

A first step toward this model is the Student Support Team (SST) concept, which we have adopted in our school. A team composed of the principal, school nurse, special education administrator, counselors, two teachers, and an SST liaison meets every week to discuss the case of one student we're worried about. There is a detailed case conference, and the team decides what course of action is warranted: an immediate child-abuse report, counseling, family outreach, modifications in the classroom, or referral for special education services. The effect of the SST is to support teachers and pool valuable knowledge and expertise to give the right intervention to high-risk students before their problems become more serious.

Effective Schools Must Develop Collegiality and a Positive Staff Culture

This has been the most difficult challenge for me as principal, having inherited a school with a negative climate. Some of the original effective schools research *(Fifteen Thousand Hours)* speaks of the need for a positive "ethos" among staff members. This determines whether teachers emerge from the isolation of their classrooms and share an interpersonal harmony in support of student achievement.

Judith Warren Little, an expert on school climate, has added depth to the thinking on school culture with her work on collegiality, which she describes as a school climate in which: "Teachers engage in frequent, concrete talk about teaching; Teachers are observed and critiqued on their teaching; Teachers design and plan teaching materials together; Teachers teach each other in various ways.[15]"

The Learning Gap by Harold Stevenson and James Stigler[16] documents the way in which Asian teachers work together. Japanese and Chinese teachers have almost half the school day free to meet with their colleagues. This schedule is possible not because the overall student/teacher ratio is higher but because each class has many more students than most American schools. Stevenson and Stigler note that Asian teachers do not spent their free periods in their classrooms, but congregate in a common teachers' room where their desks and materials are jammed in with those of their fellow teachers. Many of these daily collegial interactions are focused on crafting first-rate lessons that are polished and perfected from year to year. This is a far cry from the chronic isolation of most American teachers, and the contractual limits on principals being able to require teachers to meet with their colleagues (as is the case in our school system).

Michael Huberman of the University of Geneva in Switzerland has commented that the vision of teachers as part of one big happy family sitting around the faculty lounge discussing students and curriculum is extremely difficult to attain in American schools. He suggests that a more attainable—and meaningful—form of collegiality in elementary schools occurs when teachers at the same grade level (or contiguous clusters of grades in small schools) work together as a team around shared curriculum units, materials, and goals. Huberman has pointed the way to an important first step toward the eventual goal of schoolwide teamwork.

Such small-scale teamwork does not usually happen by accident. The principal's role in nurturing a positive staff culture and creating conditions that make it possible is vital, for example, scheduling teachers at the same grade level so their free periods coincide and they can meet together. There are other ways for principals to foster a positive staff ethos. Jon Saphier and Matthew King have described the characteristics of a strong school culture, including experimentation, trust and confidence, appreciation and recognition, celebration and humor, involvement in decision making, school traditions, and honest and open communication.[17] Building a positive school etho

takes time, sensitivity, and strategic interventions. Principals who are successful are part cheerleaders, part coaches, part researchers, part therapists, and part parent figures. It is an art I'm just beginning to master after five years on the job.

Effective Schools Must Constantly Monitor Student Progress

Another common thread in studies of effective schools is the regular and frequent review of student progress. Effective schools check on how students are doing and put the assessment results to work to help students, modify instruction, and make curriculum decisions.

This does not mean bowing down at the altar of most existing standardized tests, which are notoriously open to distortion. The more high-stakes the test, the more it can lose its meaning through outright cheating (giving answers, teaching test items, or altering students' responses), borderline cheating (narrowing the curriculum to items covered by the test), and warping of the curriculum (spending large amounts of time on test preparation). Some schools that have been identified as "effective" may have boosted their test scores more than they boosted real student learning.

A perceptive *New York Times* article bolsters this point.[18] The reporter investigated two Brooklyn elementary schools, one with very high test scores, one with very low scores. By a variety of measures, the schools seemed quite similar (both had disadvantaged populations; both had African-American principals, both seemed to be well run), but the reporter found that the principal of the high-scoring school required every teacher to spend *one period a day for the entire year* on test preparation. The real question is whether the students in the low-scoring school really had lower skills and knowledge or whether they were merely less adept at taking this particular standardized test.

Michael Huberman wrote recently that "equating cognition with achievement scores is like equating a gourmet meal with caloric intake, or a Faberge egg with an egg."[19] He went on to say that putting all the emphasis on such scores renders 80 percent of what teachers do superfluous; computer-assisted instruction can easily teach almost everything that is measured by these tests.

Standardized test scores are the coin of the realm; they are what the public accepts as the "bottom line" of education. Yet an overemphasis on test scores can take up a great deal of instructional time and lead to serious distortion, sending schools off in the wrong direction. In devising our mission statement at the Mather School, for example, it has been a struggle to resist the pressures to make

raising test scores the central objective of the school. The approach I have taken is to say that if we are doing a good job teaching, the test scores will take care of themselves. But we still give students a few days of test preparation just before the big tests each spring, just in case.

This is an area where educators need to do a better job educating the lay public about what test scores and other assessments mean—and don't mean. We need to distinguish between two types of tests: one that provides the public with comparative information on how the school is doing with respect to other schools and national norms; the second that actually helps teachers in their classrooms. The first kind should take minimal time away from instruction, and can be based on a random sampling of students. Politicians and the lay public will still demand a single number to measure school effectiveness, but the numbers educators release, as well as the information that gets used in daily instruction, can be based on much better data with much less impact on students' work time.

The second kind of test should provide teachers with information they can use to do a better job in their classrooms. Critics also worry about whether an overuse of this kind of test can distort the learning process. Donald Graves, who has done ground-breaking work in New Hampshire on teaching children to write, has likened the heavy use of pretests and posttests to pulling up a flower every day to see if it is growing. Most of the time, he says, we should be putting our energy into nurturing, not analyzing, the flowers as they grow.

Fortunately, there is a new current of thinking in the area of measuring student progress that combines teaching with assessment and offers a way out of these pitfalls. Quite abruptly, the traditional multiple-choice test has fallen into ill repute, and there is widespread agreement that a broader, more complete procedure must be used to assess students' progress—assessments involving portfolios of students' best work through the year, authentic performances in more true-to-life situations, multiple measures, and more ownership in the assessment process by teachers and principals. The new thinking is that students at each grade level should be able to see models of the kind of work they should be able to do at the end of the year, giving them a clear idea of what is expected and what they need to do to reach those goals.

If the job of assessment is to push curriculum in the right direction, these new ways of measuring achievement should get away from the distortions and problems of high-stakes standardized tests and too

many little tests throughout the week. In this way, teachers can get the information they need to teach all their students well.

Effective Schools Must Work to Maximize Family Involvement

Perhaps the "softest" of the school effectiveness factors has been the role of the family in student achievement. There is no question that children learn best when parents and teachers share similar visions, when there is, in the words of Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot, an authority on parent involvement, a "sense of constancy" between home and school.[20] But many educators are fatalistic about the impact they can have on home variables, arguing that they are tied to socioeconomic status and not amenable to intervention by the schools.

The jury is still out on a lot of this research. While studies try to pinpoint the true "effectiveness factors" in working with families, schools will be left to follow their instincts on what makes the biggest difference and what is worth investing time in when you are already overwhelmed. I agree with Jon Saphier, a Boston-based researcher and trainer,[21] that the key variable is the family's overall sense of the school's quality. Saphier believes that the true effect of the elusive parent variable can be found in the answers to questions like these: Is this a good school? Does it have my child's best interests at heart? These basic beliefs determine whether parents tell their children, verbally or nonverbally, to put forth their best efforts every day. If the school succeeds in instilling positive beliefs in parents, then family involvement will be a productive part of making the school effective.

The means for getting to this point will vary from school to school and from community to community. Spaghetti dinners may work in one school, home outreach programs in another, newsletters in another, parent empowerment on a school-based management council in another, and a schoolwide read-to-your-family program in another. It is up to each principal and staff to work with parents to find the best ways to elicit productive parent involvement. But the most important ingredients are a respectful attitude toward families and a high-quality instructional program that meets the needs of all children. At the Mather School, we strive for this kind of respectful and client-oriented approach to parents. We also send home a letter to parents every week, supplemented by a list of specific tips on the back aimed at getting parents involved in helping their children learn. We have well-attended open-house meetings twice a year, and are experimenting with parent-outreach workers to make home visits and address parenting and other ways to support student achievement. A significant contractual barrier to more meaningful parent contact is that there is no time for individual parent conferences. This is one of a number of areas where those who control the whole school system could help us do our jobs better.

HELP FROM OUTSIDE THE SCHOOL

"We're from the central office and we're here to help you improve your school." This might be one of the world's least believable statements to a school principal and staff interested in implementing an effective strategy. The fact is that, in many school systems, central office people and their mandates are more often associated with red tape, small-minded regulations, quick-fix interventions (such as a mandated reading textbook), and regulations that obstruct school-level initiatives. A conscientious principal might conclude (as a friend of mine recently did) that a major part of improving a school is "to build the moat deeper and the walls higher."

Having worked in our central office and shared a superintendent's vision of systemwide change, I believe there are specific actions that would truly enhance school improvement efforts, and they are:

Hire excellent principals. The single most important contribution anyone can make to school effectiveness is to appoint a first-rate leader. The state of the art for selecting and training principals is not fully developed, but there are some promising beginnings: The National Association of Secondary School Principals has developed the Assessment Center, which can serve as an effective initial screening of entry-level principals. Involvement of parents and staff is vital to a good match between possible candidates and the unique culture of each school. Principals have to be selected with the effective schools research in mind; it takes an unusual person to take on the much broader challenge of leading a school to educate all children.

Give principals more hiring power. Principals and school improvement teams should have considerably more power than they do to recruit and hire staff. Schools cannot and should not be held accountable for producing dramatically better student outcomes if they cannot put together a coherent team of professionals. An important part of increased hiring power is getting away from strict seniority in transfers within a school system. It is in everyone's best interests to have teachers working in an environment in which they

are happy and supported. This, of course, is a hot collective bargaining issue that will not be easily achieved in most school systems.

Provide an enlightened and effective teacher evaluation instrument. Central can hinder staff collegiality and professional development by clinging to outdated teacher evaluation checklists. Developing and adopting a state-of-the-art instrument (and providing training for school-based personnel on its implementation) can make the principal's job much easier, and enhance efforts to move teachers in the right direction in terms of curriculum and instruction. The central office should also require teachers and principals to regularly and systematically keep up with the knowledge base and renew their craft knowledge and skill.

Give school staffs time to meet. In large unionized school systems with multitiered dismissal times, the simple process of having a weekly staff meeting becomes a contractual or scheduling impossibility. It is up to the central office to put first things first. Nothing is more important to supporting a school improvement effort and unifying a staff than having a regular weekly meeting, so central has to find a way to clear that time (perhaps with students leaving an hour early and teachers staying an hour late). Central should also provide schools with more extensive professional development time (a one-week August retreat for a whole staff, for example) when it is requested by a school improvement team.

Provide ample time for one-on-one parent-teacher conferences. Another item that has to be bargained with teacher unions is providing time for teachers to meet with parents about each child's progress. Biannual mass open-house meetings have a symbolic function but do not allow meaningful parent-teacher conferences. Real conferences (at least 20 minutes per parent) have to be scheduled before or after school, or during teachers' free periods, which means building this kind of time into teachers' contracts.

Provide resources with the minimum of red tape. Principals should not have to spend large amounts of time raising funds. Basic allocations from the central office should be generous in the area of curriculum materials, and should be readily accessible to school people, who should be able to deal directly with vendors and get the best deals and the best delivery times. Basic resources also include collective bargaining agreements about class size, which might include smaller classes at the primary grade level to make possible effective teaching approaches in those grades.

Give schools more running room. Effective improvement efforts cannot be mandated or micromanaged from the central office. Having hired good principals, set the general direction, and provided support, the central office should get out of the way and monitor outcomes. Whether this takes the form of a formal school-based management initiative or a laissez-faire management strategy is unimportant; the key is for schools to feel some autonomy as they make key decisions—while at the same time understanding that they will be held accountable for getting results over time. Local autonomy should include the power to shape the budget. A radical version of this idea is the chartering of "entrepreneurial" schools being tested in Detroit and advocated in Boston by the Pioneer Institute.[22] The idea of being able to start a new school and staff it with like-minded teachers *and* get a prorated slice of the central budget is very appealing. It remains to be seen whether many schools will be able to get this degree of autonomy and this level of funding.

Cut down on standardized testing. High-stakes citywide testing programs have a negative effect on school programs, and often warp the curriculum and what happens in classrooms. The central office could do a great service to schools by opting for random-sampling tests in just a few grade levels to satisfy the public's legitimate need to compare achievement with nationwide norms. Central should also be in the forefront of promoting enlightened assessment that would push the curriculum in the right directions.

Don't micromanage the curriculum. An overly controlling, top-down curriculum—for example, a uniform textbook or a mandated method of instruction—does not allow schools enough room for creativity, and moves important decisions too far away from the classroom. A better approach is to set clear systemwide curriculum objectives and outcomes for each grade, provide an enlightened process for assessing student progress (i.e., authentic assessment versus standardized testing), and give teachers good consumer information on the best materials and programs for meeting those objectives. All other decisions on methods and materials should be made at the school level.

Set good overall goals. Central can help school-based improvement efforts by giving a clear, enlightened set of the goals and outcomes for which schools will be held accountable. Outcomes should be focused on multiple criteria and not overemphasize test scores or other easily-manipulated measures. There should also be a realistic timetable (at least three years) to show results, so that schools will develop deeper strategies, not implement superficial remedies to get central off their backs.

Keep principals in place long enough to make a difference. The kind of change that is brought about by the heroic principal who rides into town and "turns around" a school in a year or two is superficial and will not stand the test of time. The central office should not move principals around like chess pieces. It takes at least five years to turn around an ailing school and ten years to have a deep impact on the culture of a school. Good principals need to be given support to sustain their enthusiasm over time.

Provide principals with support and good mentoring. Few principals can make all the judgments about problem analysis and strategy on their own; we need outside consultation to make key decisions, especially in the opening months of a school improvement effort, but also in the ongoing dramas that characterize any change process. Central can help link principals to experienced mentors and provide supportive supervision in critical times.

Help broker access to effective improvement packages. Principals and their staffs do not have the time to research and evaluate every one of the many school improvement packages and consultants that are available. Central curriculum and planning staff should act as consumer guides to the packages that are available and become available, put schools in touch with good consultants from universities and companies, and help school teams make intelligent choices that are best for their unique circumstances.

Broker social service agency help. It is hard for schools to make all the necessary connections to outside agencies. The central office can help by acting as a matchmaker to bring health clinics, counseling services, physicians, and other consultants to schools.

Serve as effective advocates for broader social issues. One of the biggest barriers to effective schooling is poverty. School boards and superintendents should be in the front lines of fighting for programs and funding to get at the root of major social problems, including poverty, poor housing, drugs, crime, the easy availability of handguns, homelessness, etc. These are tough, long-term issues, but school people have to feel there are advocates working on these problems and that there is hope somewhere over the horizon.

With these inputs from central, principals and school improvement teams can go to work. And this, of course, is just the beginning!

Beyond the district office, other layers of government and other institutions have a less direct but still significant impact on schools. It is not the purpose of this article to explore the broader policies and initiatives at the state, national, and university level, but I will mention a few areas that can make a difference: upgrading teacher professional certification; improving teacher preparation and selection; providing incentives for top-notch college graduates to go into teaching (Teach for America, national service, etc.); providing adequate funding for all schools and eliminating gross disparities in the funding to school systems; and making serious inroads on the problems of poverty, unemployment, child care, and health care.

CONCLUSION

The morale of public school educators has suffered in recent years because of our society's increasing poverty, worsening race relations, and a dearth of solutions from the nation's leaders. Those who educate the nation's children are in the front lines of addressing the human consequences of the disastrous economic and social policies of the last decade. While we have been working to make our schools better places for all students, the escalator we're climbing has been moving *down*. For all our efforts, there is a sense of losing ground, and that's profoundly discouraging. Without a clear road map on how we can make a difference, it is easy to begin blaming each other for the worsening problems we're seeing. I have felt this kind of disunity and finger-pointing in my own school.

In times like these, those who are working directly with children in schools have to steer a dangerous course between the Scylla of burnout and the Charybdis of cynicism. The problems our students face are so harrowing that dedicated professionals can begin to lose sleep over the infinite number of things left undone, the scores of problems unsolved, and needs unmet. There's the danger of working

too hard, worrying too much, and burning out. Alternatively, there is the tug of giving up hope and beginning to treat education as just another job. This tug is especially strong in schools that lack effective leadership from the principal or superintendent—leadership that holds out hope and a vision of the importance of one's work and provides support to maintain this hope and vision.

The lack of national leadership on these issues has been deeply distressing. We know what needs to be done, but our elected leaders have not made it happen. Why is this true, when the solutions described here are so rational and obvious? My own sense is that deeply embedded in the national psyche is an acceptance of schools as a sorting mechanism, encouraged by those who espouse the notion that if students do not learn, it is their own fault.

So a change in national and local leadership attitudes is a first priority. We must commit ourselves to changing minds, or changing leaders, so that there is positive leadership around a more democratic, inclusive concept of education.

In the meantime, change happens one school at a time, and there is work to be done in the front lines. That will take great energy and commitment. How can people continue to work and believe when our students are dealing with such crushing problems? First, within each school, there must be a good overall strategy, worked out with colleagues. Second, we must be part of a team effort with colleagues who support each other's efforts. Finally, these individual efforts must be consonant with what research and good practical wisdom says will make a difference. To keep our sanity, and to be able to work effectively for our students, all three ingredients are necessary. With all three in place, hard work can make a difference for all children until the day the nation puts its house in order and comes to the aid of schools and children.

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